

Partial Transcript of Facebook Live COVID-19 Town Hall

Live-streamed Wednesday, 17 March, 2020

From the MCoE/Fort Benning Public Affairs Office, Suite W-141, McGinnis-Wickam Hall

Time of live-stream: 1830-2000 hours, approx.

Panel:

- Maj. Gen. Gary M. Brito, commanding general, U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence and Fort Benning
- Col. Matthew Scalia, commander, U.S. Army Garrison Fort Benning
- Col. Melissa J. Hoffman, commander, Martin Army Community Hospital and Medical Activity

Moderator:

- Benjamin L. Garrett, Chief of Public Affairs, MCoE/Fort Benning

Link to town hall meeting:

<https://www.facebook.com/FortBenningMCoE/videos/239657380540919/>

MODERATOR:

Welcomes audience to "the Maneuver Center of Excellence and Fort Benning Facebook Town Hall on the COVID 19 virus"

"Tonight we will discuss the precautionary measures we are taking to protect the health of the force and maintain operational readiness. We will talk about the measures we individually can take to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

"We must be vigilant and adjust normal operating procedures to protect our community from this illness. This is a team effort. I'm Ben Garrett, the Maneuver Center of Excellence Public Affairs Officer and moderator for tonight's town hall.

"Tonight, the commanding general of the Maneuver Center of Excellence and Fort Benning, Maj. Gen. Gary M. Brito, will answer your questions regarding actions we've taken to protect our Soldiers, families, civilians, who live and work here, and our community partners."

Moderator introduces the panel members, turns over to MG Brito.

MG BRITO:

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen, my name's Major General Gary Brito and I have the honor and pleasure to be the commanding general here at Fort Benning and also the honor and pleasure of being part of the same team that you're on.

"Thanks for allowing me to spend some time with you tonight and thank you for joining us, and I offer that to all of our Soldiers, our families, our DA civilians and our community partners in Columbus and surrounding cities.

"As Ben said up front, we're hosting this town hall to talk about COVID 19 virus. And it's no news to everybody, and you watch the same shows that I do, this virus is causing us, all of us, to take pause and scrutinize our daily activities.

"Now up front I want to humbly ask for three things. One, your support. Two, your understanding. And three, your full cooperation.

"This is a serious situation. Both for Fort Benning, the State of Georgia, and the entire United States and the world, quite frankly. But we will get over this. We will get over this by working together, and this indeed's gonna be a long journey, but we will get over this by working as a team.

"Our success, I will offer up to you, is going to be a little less about 'me' and a more about 'we.'

"We will have to make some adjustments to our daily lives. Every aspect from going to schools, dining out, recreation, shopping both on and off post, things are gonna to change. And I can't put a timeline when it's gonna to go back to some normalcy. But again, we will work through this.

"And what I ask, that we all continue to work with our friends, our neighbors, our Soldiers of all ranks. That we are diligent in practicing social distancing or physical distancing. And simply work with each other. Continue to do those things that our parents taught us work. Hygiene. Covering your nose when you sneeze, and stuff like that. They work.

"I also want to ask for your help in supporting our PX, AAFES facilities, commissary, and our medical training facilities.

"Now team, many have gone to the PX and commissary over the last days. They are working very hard, to keep the shelves stocked, to keep the PX and commissary clean. And they'll continue to do so. And I can tell you as soon as a truck pulls up, they fill the shelves.

"So that I'm gonna ask that all of us shop with the 'we' in mind, as the deliveries and the stockage occur.

"It is also very important, – quite frankly, imperative – that we protect the capacity of Martin Army Hospital and our military treatment facilities across the post.

"I ask that you help me help them, save their supplies, save their manpower, and be able to treat those that need the treatment the most, as this virus continues to spread, and if it continues to spread, here on Fort Benning.

"We're not exempt, again, and it's critical that we protect this critical asset, and Col. Hoffman later on will talk to some more of that.

"Now, I'm sure by now many of you have been informed about the activities across the United States and the globe quite frankly, that have been suspended, closed, postponed, and simply disrupted by this ever-spreading corona virus.

"We here at Fort Benning are no different. And we are part of the community, as we will attack this and take measures to protect ourselves, protect the health of the force, Soldiers of all ranks, families and civilians, everybody associated with Fort Benning.

"And we'll do this collectively, as a team and working with our partners in Columbus and the surrounding cities, as I said.

"Now team, I've had to make a lot of tough decisions over the last couple of days and I'll have to make some more as we go into the next couple of days ahead of us.

"Now to go over just a few, and please trust me, I fully understand the impact that the decisions have on the individuals, single Soldiers, civilians and families alike. I'm part of that with you.

"Now tomorrow our schools, our DoDEA schools on Fort Benning, will close.

"Now we made this decision, to use Monday and Tuesday, to allow the teachers some time to prep lesson plans, and as importantly, allow the families some time to plan for day care, child care and other services.

"And Matt Scalia will talk to it later on.

"But we have also allowed this time to allow us to refocus our services to those that may need them the most. And I have given some priority to our medical professionals, our EMS, and other key and essential leaders here on Fort Benning, so that we can keep this engine runnin' as we continue to protect our force.

"And also, across all of the installation, the schools, and all the tenant organizations as well, all of Fort Benning, we're taking every opportunity we can to promote working from home, call it telework or what have you, as best we can.

"I know not everybody will be able to do that. But in an effort to thin the lines, and promote social distancing in all of our employment places, to include some of the medical facilities and others, we are giving an opportunity for people to work at home and risk – correction – to minimize the risk of spreading this virus.

"I've also made the tough decision, and I know this impacts many families, to cancel all of the graduations and family days to until another point to be determined.

"I do know for those coming to visit that is tough. I've have a child in the Army myself, and I understand the impact of that.

"Additionally, we made the decision to cancel some select MWR events. Our garrison commander, Col. Scalia, will go into more detail later on....

"Any event that will draw 150 or even go lower than that based off recent CDC and congressional recommendations, any event that draws large groups of people, simply something we had to look at and cancel or postpone.

"Additionally, made the tough call to cancel all in-person religious services. I know that is very tough and personal for many families, to include my own. The great work of our chaplaincy corps and Chaplain Agbere as well, are working teleprompting services for the families to enjoy....

MG Brito also discusses closings, including those affecting bowling, bingo, fitness centers, etc.

"Also we've taken a very close look at our food courts, barber shop and other venues that Soldiers need and families need, to run their daily lives. Again, we want to promote and implement physical distancing, social distancing measures to help us out. They're staying open at this time...And our senior noncommissioned officers across the post will help us through the execution of courtesy patrols and other measures to make sure those things can function, but we practice great hygiene and social distancing."

MG Brito cites recent restrictions on travel, including a memorandum that applies through 11 May 2020

"Please trust me, we are very aware of the concern this memorandum has caused. We want to give you some clarity tonight."

"We are analyzing that guidance now and will send it to our commanders to ensure that the units are informed."

MG Brito says DoD travel ban applies to military personnel, DoD civilians, through 11 May but date could be adjusted by senior leadership

"Please note that the restrictions apply to government funded travel. So, family dislocation allowance that you may have once received, or per diem, or permissive TDY, stuff that is funded by the government, will not be funded by the government. It is under the ban right now, through May 11."

MG Brito says Fort Benning will update the community as new information is received

"At this point, also under the travel ban, leaves and passes, for uniformed personnel, under my direction, in a policy which I've signed today, will be limited to a 100-mile radius."

"I do know that this impacts plans that many families may have had already, for spring break. Trust me, I understand that. But it is something that we must do and implement to protect our Soldiers and our families."

"We do have the authority to closer examine exceptions for emergency leave, convalescent leave, and other circumstances that may apply to our individuals and Soldiers. My commanders, your commanders, know the rules that we need to follow and they'll pass those exceptions up to me as applicable."

"Quarantine. All of the nation is practicing quarantine, which is very prudent to prevent the spread of this virus. We do have personnel on quarantine...As of today, we have also tested personnel, we have tested 10 and I can tell you as of this moment we do not have any that have tested positive for the COVID-19 cases here on Fort Benning

"There are cases within the state of Georgia, at last count, about 90 minutes ago, 146. We are also aware of the cases within the counties surrounding Fort Benning. We'll continue to update on our COVID-19 page, as well as the CDC page, talk to those. It is growing rapidly throughout the day and we'll continue to monitor those, but at this point, we don't have any close to us. We do not have any confirmed cases of COVID-19 on Fort Benning. We have tested 10 Soldiers to date."

MG BRITO TURNS OVER TO COL. HOFFMAN

COL HOFFMAN:

"We're doing everything humanly possible to slow down the spreading of this virus as well as keep our current cases at zero."

"Remember that social distancing has proven to be the best way to contain this virus...So if you are sick, please stay home and perform self-care.

"But if you do have health care concerns, you are sick, you feel your condition is worsening, I would recommend you call our nurse advice line at 1-800-874-2273, select option 1."

It's staffed 24 hours daily by a qualified nurse who will triage you and provide further guidance on how to proceed.

If you're sick, stay home and do self-care.

But if you're getting worse, call 1-800-874-2273 select option 1.

COL Hoffman says pre-screening being done at all external health care clinics and that at the main hospital outside screening site is in place

"At present, anyone seeking health care services at the hospital will be asked to participate in this pre-screening process.

"This mitigates the risk of COVID-19 entering our hospital, ensures your safety, and that of our health care team."

"Please allow extra time travelling to the hospital to allow for this pre-screening process to occur."

"After parking, you will directed to a screening tent. There, you will be asked some questions: Do you have any of these symptoms? A cough, sore throat, shortness of breath, a fever? Have you had any contact with a person who has been diagnosed with the coronavirus, or have you traveled to any of those Level 2 or 3 countries that the CDC has pushed out?

"You will also be given an oral temperature check. Then based on the outcome of this screening you will either be assessed further, or you will be directed to our emergency department."

COL Hoffman also discusses scheduled appointments and procedures, pharmacy, other services

"The only entrance currently to the hospital is through our emergency department. The main entrance is now for exit only. When you enter, we will direct you to the shortest route possible to your destination.

"If you are here to be seen, if you're presenting to the hospital to be seen in the ER, please let a staff member know and we will expedite your movement through the screening process."

Testing and priority of testing, they're working "very closely with" the local department of health, state of Georgia, and CDC.

"At this point, we are still providing health care services. But with the recommended social distancing, we are attempting to implement telemedicine whenever possible. What that means for a non-emergent visit, we can use the telephone potentially to conduct your visit between you and your health care provider.

"If you are more comfortable with delaying a check-up or a routine appointment, you also have the option of rescheduling your appointments using secure messaging, or by calling our Central Appointment Line at 762-408-2273. Again we're actively assessing this process with the focus on readiness and protection of our force."

After Col Hoffman concludes, MG Brito notes that the information being presented during the town hall applies to the entire Fort Benning community, including tenant units, others

MG BRITO TURNS OVER TO COL. SCALIA

COL Scalia covers child development centers and school age services, gates and installation access, AAFES, commissary, MWR entertainment and dining, DoDEA, housing, rumors

"What are we doing to restrict access? Fort Benning is still open. The only restricted movement we have made or access we have made is to families who are here visiting their trainees in the initial entry training environment. Okay? So our Sand Hill and Harmony Church Soldiers in training....The canceling of family days and graduations, we have so many families yearning to see their children. But quite frankly we don't want them on post and mixing with them again because that just heightens the risk and the chance of exposure.

"So, like everything else we are reassessing. We may, if conditions warrant, have to take other measures to restrict access to non-essential people, but ultimately we will remain open for life and mission-essential personnel."

COL Scalia discusses shopping-related matters

"Re-stocking of items, just like outside the gate, we are struggling to get the right amount of supplies and items that we're all demanding. Okay? So because of that we've had to implement a three-item limit on some high-demand purchases. Specifically, as you're all aware, the cleaning and some personal hygiene items. Okay? We will keep that in place. And as situations warrant, we might have to implement restrictions on other such items. Again, to echo General Brito, ask that everybody think as a community, that we work together on this, and not try to over-purchase items. Items are coming in. They're stocking the shelves as fast as they can. So please, please be patient.

"You will see that these areas are all doing much more thorough cleaning, not just when they're closed but through the course of a day. They're wiping down all those frequently-touched areas. You're seeing the scanning lanes being wiped down between customers."

"All our dining services on post are now take-out or delivery only. All dine-in has ended. This includes our various food courts and the tables and chairs are being taken away or sectioned off so people cannot use them."

COL Scalia discusses schools, then housing

"Housing will no longer action work orders unless they are to life, health, safety, or emergency. We are suspending currently urgent or routine and our preventive maintenance work orders. We ask for your patience. When conditions warrant and we're able to go back to our routine and urgent there'll be a large backlog so we're gonna see a lengthy wait period to get some of those done. But please know that life, health and safety work and emergency work orders will continue to be addressed."

COL Scalia discusses rumors

"Lastly, I'd like to discuss rumors. A lot of energy spent here in trying to trace down rumors. Now I understand the concerns, and when they come up, my ask of you is that you address them in an appropriate manner. Posting a comment on our Facebook website is not preferred.

"Ask that with your service member, address it through the chain of command, or even private message via Facebook to our garrison PAO as they monitor it regularly. And then we can give you a straight answer from the right people without putting fear into other people reading an open comment."

COL SCALIA TURNS OVER TO MG BRITO

MG Brito reiterates zero cases of COVID-19 at Fort Benning, also says:

"I would also like to say we are partners with the city of Columbus and the state so we will closely monitor those directives that come from the city leadership and the state leadership as well, and respond in kind. Although I know we may have some decisions unique to Fort Benning, and all that'll be taken into consideration before we implement any decisions."

Video is shown. Speaker is MAJ Aaron Farmer, Chief of Infectious Disease, Womack Army Medical Center.

Q&A BEGINS, IN COURSE OF WHICH ONE OF THE QUESTIONS IS: "Will Fort Benning shut down when Columbus gets its first positive case of COVID-19? If yes, what would that look like for those who live on post. If not, why not?"

MG BRITO:

"Okay, that's a good question. I'm gonna say no. When we get our first case, and again we don't have a first case now, we have zero at this point. But that is something that I would need to look at closely to do a quick analysis on the spread of this virus and the impact it's gonna have on Fort Benning and, bold underscore at this point, Columbus.

"We will continue to keep in close dialogue with the city of Columbus and all the surrounding cities as well.

"I am not gonna say we're immune, but at this point very fortunate not to have any positive cases.

"But I need to make the analysis, when it does happen, if we have a confirmed case on Fort Benning, what we're doing with that Soldier, or civilian, that has been indeed confirmed as a positive case.

"One, ensure he or she gets a proper medical treatment, which may be quarantine and isolation in some case or mixture of both, and two, the impact that it's gonna have on Fort Benning and where that occurred.

"Again, some testing procedures, screening procedures, all of that apply, so, long and short of it, no, I will not make the determination now, we have one case will we close Fort Benning? But I will do the analysis.

"On the question, what will it look like if Fort Benning closes? Now we have to do some extremely hard decisions on that, extreme decisions on that and I've talked to the garrison commander as well. You know this as well as I do. We have a lot of functions that have to run through the gate.

"I will tell you a little-known fact. Of all the military installations in the United States, Fort Benning is within the top two for the number of visitors that come through, whether seeing families, or business, around 21,000.

"So something I'll have to look at, very closely if we are put in a position we have to close Fort Benning, close all of our access points, is how do we continue to push the services that we need? The gas truck. The people that bring food supplies and ice to all of our installations, the hospital and other places. Those life support activities that make this place run. They still need to happen. The resupply at the commissary and PX. Those things need to happen.

"So, if we get to that point, and we have talked about it, in conjunction with our DES and the garrison staff as well, we've looked at that contingency, one that I hope we don't have to implement, and if we do, we'll have to carefully control any access to the installation. We'll have to control any egress from the installation. That includes family members, Soldiers and others that are on the post and it will disrupt our lives, quite frankly.

"As I mentioned a few moments ago in a previous question, we will also in kind as best we can, try to stay nested with the activities that the city of Columbus and the state of Georgia are doing as well. I do understand that we're a military community but we are part of the community and part of the state. So all of the decisions that they make, we'll definitely consider those heavily and make the appropriate decision to protect our families, our Soldiers and our civilians on Fort Benning."

MG BRITO CLOSING COMMENTS:

"This COVID-19 situation and threat is real and it's spreading. And just like the city of Columbus, the state of Georgia, this entire nation and globe, we're gonna deal with it.

"But I would like to finish kind of where I started. On three things that I'm asking for your support on. We're in this together. We will get through this. Our lives will be disrupted for a little while but we will get through this. And I can't give you a timeline how [indistinct]it's gonna take. But as an installation, as a team, as a military community, we're gonna get through this. Again, I would ask for your support, your understanding, and your cooperation.

"And I'll add a fourth one. I ask for your patience. As we continue to work through this serious situation, we're not alone. The rest of the military as well.

"But I am very confident that as a team and with your support, we're gonna get through this, just as the rest of our [indistinct] United States will as well. So thank you so much for your time tonight. We'll continue to be transparent and keep you informed. One Force, One Fight."

(Transcribed by Franklin Fisher, Command Information Officer, MCoE/Fort Benning Public Affairs Office)